

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Formation of Canadian health sciences library associations

The symposium on the creation and achievements of the Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries (AAHSL) [1] demonstrates the differences in how health sciences library associations have been formed in Canada and the United States. As described in the symposium, the more "specialized" AAHSL was formed by members of the more "general" Medical Library Association, founded over seventy-five years earlier. In Canada the reverse occurred and the foundation of the Canadian Health Libraries Association (CHLA) followed fifteen years after the creation of an association by and for Canadian medical school library directors.

As described by Heaton [2], the Canadian equivalent of AAHSL—now called the Committee on Medical School Libraries of the Association of Canadian Medical Colleges—was formed in 1961 as the Committee on Medical Science Libraries of the Canadian Library Association. In 1967, this group became a standing committee of the Association of Canadian Medical Colleges (ACMC). It remains active and its membership now consists of the directors of all sixteen Canadian medical school libraries, the head of the Health Canada Library, and a representative from the Canada Institute for Scientific and Technical Information (CISTI). The committee meets during the annual meeting of the ACMC, coordinates its activities with the CHLA, works closely with other ACMC committees and the ACMC Executive, has produced annual statistics since its foundation, and maintains an active discussion list.

The CHLA was founded in 1976 [3] following recommendations from an ad-hoc committee estab-

lished by the ACMC Committee and the Canadian Section of MLA. Prior to the creation of the CHLA, Canadian health sciences librarians had created a number of informal local groups, often affiliated with a medical school library and had formed a Canadian Section of MLA. The section, which dissolved soon after the formation of CHLA, met only at the MLA annual meeting, and was more social than professional.

*David S. Crawford, FCLIP
Emeritus Librarian
david.crawford@mcgill.ca
McGill University
Montreal, Canada*

References

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2. HEATON G. Highlights of the history of Canadian medical school librarians. *Bibliotheca Medica Canadiana* 1983, 4(4):82–84.
3. CRAWFORD DS. CHLA/ABSC 25 years on. *Bibliotheca Medica Canadiana* 2000, 22(2):71–73.

Business as usual?

The relationships between publishers, booksellers (or agents) and libraries have always been characterized by certain ambiguities. In some ways these three groups are mutually supportive, in other ways they are competitors. For example, libraries buy books, thus providing income for publishers and retailers. But they also lend books, thus perhaps depriving publishers and retailers of potential sales.

In recent years, electronic marketing has disturbed the traditional balance of power in this triangle of mutual dependency. In particular, it has given publishers a royal road

to the consumer, bypassing retailers and libraries. Although libraries do continue to act as intermediaries between users and publishers, the long back runs of journals, which used to be the glory of their collections, are fast disappearing.

To make matters worse, libraries are increasingly confronted by high "institutional" prices. The rationale of high institutional pricing is that libraries are giving access to numerous individuals, and should be prepared to pay accordingly. But surely libraries are actually helping publishers to sell their product, both by endorsing it and by distributing information about it in numerous ways.

Perhaps publishers should make journals *free* to libraries? This might actually cause the number of personal subscriptions to *rise*, through increased exposure to potential subscribers. Possibly library subscriptions are not such a drain on publishers as the latter would have us believe. And the experiment might prove (as many suspect) that institutional pricing is really just a case of what the market will bear.

Although publishing is a business, and libraries in a sense are businesses, they operate within an intellectual marketplace in which money is not the important currency. They must facilitate the exchange of ideas, or perish. Libraries work to place the materials of scholarship in an arena where access is determined by need. If publishers employ technology to defeat this essentially humanitarian enterprise, the intellectual community will presumably seek to develop alternative models of scholarly communication.

*Stephen C. Due
Chief Librarian
due@BarwonHealth.org.au
Barwon Health Library Service
Geelong, Australia*